

Hom.^m
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Laubeny
Ch.

THE
TRIAL OF THE SPIRITS,

A
SEASONABLE CAUTION

AGAINST
SPIRITUAL DELUSION;

IN
THREE DISCOURSES,

ADDRESSED
TO THE CONGREGATION ASSEMBLED IN
CHRIST' CHURCH, BATH.

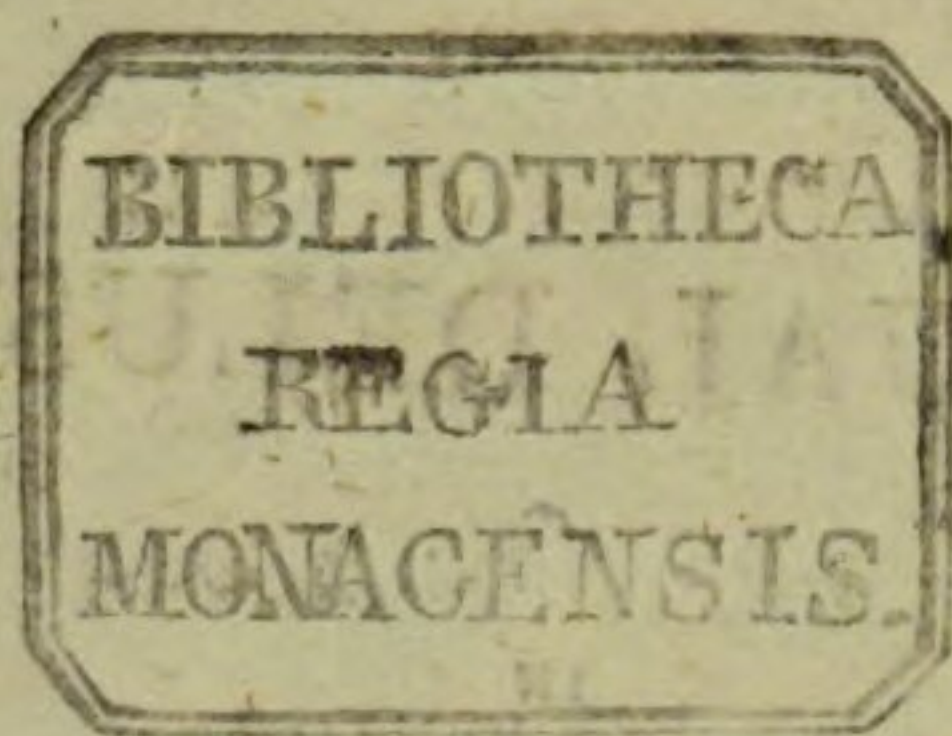
BY THE
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TO THE
CONGREGATION

ASSEMBLED IN

CHRIST' CHURCH, BATH.

THE following Discourses lately delivered before you, being adapted to the circumstances of the times, may on that account be deemed worthy your attentive perusal. They were written with the view of qualifying you to judge *rightly* of the work of the spirit; and thereby secure you from imposition on a subject of the most important concern.

The open attacks of Atheism and Infidelity are not more to be guarded against, than are the secret, though not less dangerous plans of *Schism* and *Enthusiasm*. That unremitted zeal now manifested in seducing members from the church, every honest minister of it is imperiously called upon to counteract. I should do less than my duty therefore, did I not discharge my office towards you in this respect.

One great object in the erection of the building, in which you are assembled was, that so far at least as the capaciousness of its walls extended, all excuse for separation from the Church of England might be superseded by the conviction, that it was not necessary to seek *elsewhere* for that vital spirit of genuine christianity, which ought to be the grand *desideratum* in every Christian country. Of truly pious persons of every description, it is our wish, at all times, to speak with becoming respect, and to live with them, “as it becometh the Gospel;” at the same time, we consider it to be our duty to remind them in charity, that no circumstances of piety, learning, or wisdom, joined with Schism, can change the nature of the sin; nor can that sin be rendered less sinful than the Scripture has made it, because unhappily, it is now become more common. But it may be asked, whether it can be any recommendation, even of *true* piety, that it should be *eccentric*. Or whether true piety become less so, than it otherwise would be, or in any degree sink in the scale of estimation, by being accompanied with a due regard to order and obedience. To us it appears, that of two supposed equal degrees of piety, that of the party who lives in communion with the church, is to be preferred to that of the person separating from it; on the ground of his piety

being accompanied with that humility, which, in conformity with the Apostolic injunction, has preserved its possessor, in submission to the authority appointed to rule over him.

“ Fanatics (says a learned and vigilant Bishop* of the present day) by pretending to an extraordinary degree of sanctity, to a species of faith not to be found in the Gospel, to an especial call or gift of grace, which supersedes the necessity of education, and the regular ordination commanded and practised by the Apostles themselves, seduce the people from their appointed ministers, separate them from the communion of the Church, gain a compleat ascendancy over them, and instil into their minds the most dangerous opinions, with the most active enthusiasm.” Not content with that humble, unassuming, trembling hope, which becomes the frailty and imperfection, even of the best of men to entertain; and which is the general result of self-acquaintance, accompanied with a proper use of the appointed means of grace; they boast of, and diligently inculcate a *confident assurance* of salvation; an *experimental* knowledge of the forgiveness of sins by some *sensible* operations of the Holy Spirit; and arrogate to themselves those extraordinary gifts, which, for wise reasons,

* Bishop of Lincoln in his Charge, 1800.

peculiarly distinguished the first preachers of the Gospel. Although the Apostle in describing the state of the saints, makes use of no terms calculated to convey an idea of their implicit confidence, hardy assurance, or infallible knowledge of their salvation; but represents these first fruits of the Gospel, as pressing forward towards the attainment of their heavenly prize, forgetting those things which were behind, and stretching forth to those things which were before; thus labouring to make their calling and election sure: supported, indeed, by a *lively* hope, but not presuming to erect that hope into knowledge or *certainty* of their salvation; depending, not on their own strength, but on the co-operation of the Holy Spirit, with their feeble, but honest endeavours; whilst he concludes the ensamples set before them for their admonition, with the following salutary and important caution: “Wherefore, let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed, lest he fall.”

Empiricks in medicine are, generally speaking, as abundant in confidence and promise, as they are deficient in knowledge and performance. Whilst for their success in the world, they are for the most part indebted to the defective information, and consequent credulity of the parties on whom they practise.—To a defect of information, though on a different subject, in

the members of the Church, are the pretended Apostles of the present day, for the most part indebted for the success of their multifarious impositions. Should a member of the Church, for instance, having long lived, as we are sorry to say is too often the case, in a merely *nominal* connection with his spiritual mother, and consequently in a state of ignorance and unprofitableness under the means of grace administered in her communion, be brought by distress, or some other providential circumstance, to his first serious thoughts on the subject of religion; he will be apt, from that self-love natural to man, to lay the blame any where, rather than at his own door. When therefore he hears mention made of *sensible* operations of the Spirit, conveying a confident *assurance* of salvation, and an *experimental* knowledge of the forgiveness of sins, operations to which, as yet, he has lived a perfect stranger; his too common conclusion is, that there must be some defect in that religious service, to which he has been hitherto accustomed; and that the obvious remedy for it is, to take his seat under one of those *miscalled* *Evangelical* Teachers, from whom he may hear that comfortable, though self-deluding doctrine, in which, unhappily for himself, he is now taught to consider the essence of Christianity to consist. Thus does he add one sin to another, by seeking

to correct his former criminal neglect or abuse of sacred ordinances, by a contemptuous breach of that order and government, which the divine founder of the Church expressly instituted for the benefit of her members.

But did this unstable Christian consider, that the spiritual services of the Church were designed for the use of spiritual persons; that by a progressive advancement from grace to grace, and from strength to strength, they might at length attain unto the fullness of stature in Jesus Christ; he would be convinced that a conclusion, drawn from the neglect or abuse of them, stood on too weak ground to justify his conduct, as a reasonable being, in turning his back on her communion. Did he consider moreover, that *immediate* and *sensible* operations in the œconomy of grace do not correspond with the ordinary methods of the divine proceeding, nor with the condition of man in a state of trial; did he consider that God doth not, in the ways of his Providence, make himself known to us by *sensible* manifestations of his presence; he might conclude, that there is as little cause to think, that (*ordinarily*) God makes himself known to us by any *sensible* operations of his Spirit on our minds. For *any* sensible interposition of divine power to direct us in the government of ourselves, whether

externally or *internally* applied, comes to the same thing.

There are cases, indeed, where it is necessary for God to make himself *sensibly* known to the minds of men ; when, for instance, he means to make new discoveries of his will. But such cases are foreign to our present subject.—The Christian “walks by faith, not by sight.”—And the exercise of this faith consists in yielding a ready obedience to God, on the ground of his revealed word, in conformity with the dictates of an enlightened understanding. An exercise which supposes the concurrence of the divine grace helping our infirmities, at the same time that the work of the Spirit is considered only as a *secret, imperceptible* operation.

This view of the subject would teach him, not to look for *sudden* and *extraordinary* interpositions of the Spirit in his favour ; but to expect, in conformity with the general sense of Scripture, the accomplishment of the divine work of grace in the regular and ordinary way of God’s appointment. It would teach him, that a progressive system of religious education, according to the plan of the Church of England, (to the present neglect of which, every evil may be traced up,) provides the most effectual security against the delusions of enthusiasm ; at the same time, that it is best calculated to promote that

vital godliness, which ought to be the characteristic of every Christian; by furnishing that settled kind of knowledge on divine subjects, least likely to give place to doctrines, however imposing, which have not the authority of Scripture to support them. For want of this system of religious education having been uniformly adhered to, (a circumstance never to be sufficiently lamented) many members of our Church, unfurnished, in consequence of their defective education, with any fixed principles to govern them; who have taken up religion, as it too often happens, at an advanced period of life; not finding from it all the satisfaction expected, are tempted to make experiments, in the hope of improving their condition. Conceiving their case to be of an *extraordinary* kind, they think it necessary to have recourse to *extraordinary* remedies *. At the same time did they consider,

* The late Mr. Jones, in his excellent Discourse on the Temptation of Christ, makes the following comment on that part of it, which relates to the devil's tempting our Saviour to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple, in the confidence, on the ground of a text of Scripture perverted for the purpose, that he would be preserved by an *extraordinary* Providence, from the obvious consequence of such a presumptuous act. "We cannot secure ourselves more effectually against this sin (of presuming on *extraordinary*, whilst the *ordinary* means of salvation are neglected) than by meditating on the text, in which Christ replied to

that there is no spiritual case whatever, to which the spiritual means furnished by the Church, *if faithfully used*, are not completely adequate; they would conclude, as it might be supposed every thinking man must, that the means administered under the sanction of a divine institution, were to be preferred to those, which, whatever be their pretensions, have certainly *no such sanction* to recommend them. Should these persons, from a prevalent dejection of mind, be induced never to think well of their state, till they *experience* something within themselves, which they have not yet experienced, and which they cannot be assured they ever shall; this will lead them to cast off all hope in God,

the devil,—“Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.” If we seek the protection and salvation of God, we must make no vain experiments, to turn his truth or his power out of their proper channel: if we hope to receive the benefits of his promises, we must be content to receive that benefit in his own way: by the ordinary means of grace, his word and sacraments; and *in the Church*; that *visible* society, wherein alone those means are administered. To invent any other method of salvation, however it may seem to be favored by perverted Texts of Scripture, is *to tempt God*: having first flattered ourselves, that because he hath promised to be with us, while we are with his Church, he must therefore send his angels to bear us up, when we have quitted our station, and have ventured upon a flight through the air.”

and to give themselves up to despair; which, if it drives not to destruction, cuts up virtue by the root; for they who have no hope in God, can have no heart to serve him.

But in such cases, religion has not been fairly dealt with, and persons thus circumstanced, have to blame themselves; if, instead of being the source of true comfort and pleasure, which religion was designed to be, and certainly would have proved in their favor, had she been suffered to have grown up with them in familiar intercourse; she should in some degree resent their past neglect of her, by withholding from them some portion of her blessings. Still, (as a celebrated Heathen* finely observed) “Happy is the man, to whom it shall be allotted, even in old age, to be able to attain to wisdom, and true opinions.” And though the spiritual state of such a person may not be altogether what it might have been, it will yet be a very safe one; provided he does not seek to be wise above what is written, and is contented to “walk *humbly* with his God,” in those old and tried paths, which have been graciously marked out for his direction.

* Præclarè enim Plato; “Beatum, cui etiam in Senectute contigerit, ut Sapientiam verasque opiniones assequi possit.”

CICERO DE FIN. v. 21.

That, having a right understanding in all things, you may be enabled, through grace, to continue to the end, in the way that leadeth unto life, is the sincere wish and prayer, of

Your faithful and affectionate

Servant in Christ,

C. D.

I have a right understanding in all things, you may be assured through grace to continue to the end in the way that leads to life is the surest and best of

Your faithful and affectionate

Friend in Christ

C. D.

DISCOURSE I.

JOHN III. 8.

The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof; but canst not tell whence it cometh, nor whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit.

IT is through the medium of natural objects, that man, in his present state, can be brought to understand things relative to the nature and operations of a spiritual Being. For a spiritual sense not being natural to man, that degree of knowledge which he attains in spiritual things must be derived to him, from a method of instruction adapted to the circumstances of his condition. The light of the body is the eye; but let the beams of material light be withheld from it, and it becomes an useless organ. The light of the mind is reason; but till the Sun of Revelation shines upon it, it must be in darkness.

with respect to the things of God ; as mankind were after they had departed from God, and were become their own teachers. “ The natural man,” says the Apostle, that is, man as he now is by nature, “ receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

To be qualified then for this spiritual discernment, man must have a spiritual instructor. In other words, his knowledge of God and spiritual things must be derived from divine Revelation : and for this obvious reason ; because “ the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God,” 1 Cor. ii. 11. But a divine Revelation designed for the benefit of man must teach him in the way in which he is to be taught, or man will still remain uninformed. With this view spiritual things, which, were they described as they really exist in themselves, would be unintelligible, are graciously brought down to the human capacity by the help of type and emblem, parable and similitude ; which, like pictures of visible things, placed before the eye of the understanding, teach us, in a language familiar to mankind, to form some notion of those unseen things, of which mere words had been incompetent to furnish an idea.

Thus it is that we are enabled to see the spiritual in the natural world : God having been

pleased to make use of * the *glass of nature* to shew us of himself: till that time arrives when we shall see him as he is, “face to face;” and not as we are now obliged to do, by reflection from the objects of nature.

“All who do not know the use of *this natural glass*, are under the poverty of ignorance: they lose a great help to their faith, together with a great instrument for the improving their understandings in spiritual things. What would be divinity, what can a teacher of it be, without the use of analogies, and the power we acquire when we argue from them? They are so universal in the scripture, that a man may as well read English without the alphabet, as read the Bible without understanding its analogies. They are therefore never to be given up; but to be insisted upon and recommended to others, as the very life and soul of christian wisdom.”—JONES.

The only danger attendant on this figurative mode of instruction is, that a latitude being given to the imagination, the application of the figure may at times be extended beyond its original and proper design. But in such case, he who should thus extend it, is alone answerable for consequent absurdities. A picture, we know, is at best but an

* δι' σκοπτρον εν αινυγματι.”—*Thro’ a glass darkly, or in an enigma or riddle.* 1 Cor. xiii. 12.

imperfect and partial representation of some reality. More ideas are not therefore to be drawn from it, than it was intended to convey. The design of a picture is to give that representation of an absent object, which may be sufficient to furnish a general idea with respect to its nature, form, and character; but not to enable the observer to enter into a minute description of its particular properties and qualities. In like manner, types, parables, and similitudes, are not intended to give a *literal* description, but such a representation of the object to which they refer, as may be suited to the immediate purpose for which they are introduced. To derive from them therefore that information which they were designed to convey, an attention to this purpose must constitute the rule for their application. Whilst a deviation from it may not barely lead to inconsistencies and contradictions, but may go so far as in a great degree to defeat the object in view on the occasion.

Figurative allusions, then, it must be remembered, are to be taken in a *figurative* sense; and so far only, as they were intended to apply to the case in hand: they otherwise change their nature, and become, what they certainly were not designed to be, literal descriptions. With this distinction before us, we shall be better qualified “rightly to divide the word of truth;”

giving to each part its respective weight and consequence; by considering, in conformity with the foregoing rule of judgement, the particular object in view in the introduction of any parable or allusion in the sacred writings, we shall be in no danger of digressing from the particular conclusion to which it was meant to lead.

Thus much has been thought necessary to be said, by way of introduction to the subject of the text; with a view of guarding in some measure against that licentious interpretation of the sacred writings, which has at times proved more favourable to the growth of enthusiasm, than to the promotion of sound and rational christianity. Spiritual things are *real* though *invisible*. God is not seen: the soul of man is not seen: what acts upon it is not seen. Still the Christian has no doubt in his mind with respect to the real existence and operation of either. Hence it is truly said of him, that he “walks by *faith*, not by *sight*.” And hence it is, that without faith it is impossible that we should please God; because without *faith* we see nothing, we know nothing, we receive nothing, we are nothing; and whilst we continue in this faithless condition, the whole Gospel, *in itself* the power of God unto salvation, is *to us* no better than a dream.

The operation of the Spirit on the soul of man then is *certain*, though *invisible*: it is that mysterious operation which is the proper object of faith; but not a subject for description. It not being within the compass of our faculties to ascertain either the nature of the cause, or the particular mode of its operation, our conclusions on this sublime subject must therefore be drawn from the quality of the effects produced. To direct our judgement in the case before us, allusion is made to a most familiar process in nature; to the effect of which we almost daily bear witness, at the same time that we are in ignorance both with respect to the origin and manner of its production. “The wind bloweth where it listeth; and thou hearest the sound thereof; but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth; so is every man that is born of the Spirit.”

The wind, here made the type of the Holy Spirit, is of all the creatures best suited for the purpose. For, in the first place, of all bodily things, it is the least bodily; and being invisible, at the same time that it is quick and powerful in operation, it comes nearest to the nature of a Spirit. Moreover, as in the natural world it is said of the wind, that without its salutary action, the air would be motionless and stagnant, deprived of its necessary vital quality; and of the

human body, that when deprived of breath, it ceases to live ; in like manner it may be said of the Holy Ghost in the spiritual world, that without *Him* there is no operation : for without the Spirit of Christ there can be no life in the Church. From the analogy thus in some respects subsisting between three different agents, the wind in the air, the breath in the human body, and the Spirit in Christ's mystical body, the Church, the same name has been given to all three ; and it is a matter of nice judgement in some cases, to determine to which of them it particularly applies. But though there exists a degree of similitude between these several agents, to justify the use of analogy, for the purpose of illustrating in some measure the characteristic properties of the supreme invisible Spirit ; still the difference between them, to every rational mind, must be sufficiently striking, to prevent such analogy from being carried beyond its proper and intended limits.

When the Holy Ghost descended on the Apostles at the day of Pentecost, he came, we are told, under the type of "*a mighty rushing wind.*" But we are at the same time informed, that this wind "*came suddenly from heaven.*" And the purpose for which it came, is also expressly marked out ; namely, to fill "*the place where the Apostles sat ;*" and that place only. The wind

in this case was therefore a *supernatural cause*, put in action for the express and immediate production of a *supernatural effect* : and the scripture account of it is to be considered as a figurative description of that *extraordinary* power, exerted from on high, for the necessary and instantaneous qualification of the first preachers of the Gospel.

But the wind, to which our Saviour likens the *ordinary* operation of the Spirit in the œconomy of divine grace, was not “a rushing mighty wind coming suddenly from heaven ;” but that appointed agent, whose office it is to co-operate in the established system of nature, and of which our Saviour expressly says, that “we know not *whence it cometh*, nor whither it goeth.”

From the allusion therefore in the text, on which the present discourse is founded, the conclusion is, that the operation of the Spirit on the human soul, bears a resemblance to that of the wind on the face of nature in this respect ; that whilst the effects are manifest, the origin and particular process of the cause remain, in both cases, equally invifible and unaccountable.

Our Saviour on this occasion was conversing with Nicodemus, a Jewish Rabbi, on the great change necessary to take place in fallen man to qualify him for admiffion into the kingdom of God. The strong figurative language made use

of by our Saviour to convey his meaning, led Nicodemus into a gross mistake. He knew of no other birth but that by which a natural man is born into this world. To correct this mistake our Saviour informs him, that his discourse respected that great change wrought on the human soul by the mysterious operation of the divine Spirit; by which the natural man entered on a new and spiritual life: a change so great, that it was figuratively described by the strong expression of his “being born again.” And to convince him that such a change was actually to be produced, at the same time that the cause and process of it were invisible, our Saviour refers him for the illustration of the fact to one of the most common operations in nature, that of the wind blowing in what direction it pleaseth: for though he could not see the wind, still the sound of it convinced him of its being actually in motion: and though he could not tell whence it came or whither it went, yet he plainly marked its effects. “So, says our Saviour, is every one that is born of the Spirit.”

The great doctrine of Regeneration was a doctrine, of which Nicodemus appears at this time to have formed no conception. His answer therefore to our Saviour was in the language of the *natural man*, who “discerneth not the things of the Spirit of God:”—“How can these things

be?" But our Saviour attempts not, it is to be observed, to make the circumstance of a man's being born again, more credible by any particular explanation of the manner, in which it was to be effected. The doctrine of Regeneration, as an article of faith, was not to be explained, but to be received on the ground of divine authority. On such a subject the question, "how can these things be," is out of place; for "to him that believeth all things are possible." In what manner "the power of God unto salvation" is exerted, to produce the new creature of the Gospel, we cannot know; because God has not thought proper to inform us: but that it *really is exerted* for that gracious purpose, we may be satisfied, from certain characteristic indications. And though we can neither see the Spirit, nor ascertain the particular process of that mysterious operation, by which the *natural* man becomes *spiritual*; still we cannot fail to be convinced of the great effect, when it has actually taken place.

From this allusion then in the text, by which we are given to understand, that a knowledge of the cause and precise manner of its operation, is not necessary to the belief of an effect really produced; we proceed to draw such inferences, as may be useful to the rational Christian in forming his judgement on spiritual subjects.

We infer then, in the first place, that man may have sufficient reason to believe a thing to exist, without being able to account for it; and consequently, that difficulties about the manner of any thing's subsisting, furnish no objection against the truth of it, when there is evidence sufficient to support it. Our knowledge of things in nature, with which we are daily conversant, is derived, for the most part, from the observation of effects produced. And here, generally speaking, our knowledge stops. To confine ourselves to the allusion in our text. We know, for instance, from the information of our senses, when the wind blows: whilst the most learned inquiry has not been able to ascertain the cause of its blowing, or to determine whence it cometh or whither it goeth; at the same time we are as certain as we can be of any thing, submitted to the test of sense, from the motion of the trees, and other similar effects, that the wind is in action.

Of a similar kind is the knowledge we are capable of attaining, with respect to a man said to be born of the Spirit. There are certain marks which characterize this spiritual birth; whenever then these marks are clearly to be distinguished, we reasonably conclude, that the subject in which they are found, is a regenerate being. From an observation of the effects produced, we know,

that such effects must proceed from an efficient cause. That cause, we understand from sacred authority, is the Holy Spirit: and here our knowledge on this subject stops.

From hence it appears, that some things are capable of being known by effects, which are not to be known in any other way. A consideration which should teach men in what manner to employ their reasoning powers to the best advantage; by occupying them with subjects, on which the observation of facts enables them to form a judgment, rather than with those from which they can draw no conclusion, but what is built on the uncertain ground of conjecture. This consideration is in no cases of more importance, than in those which respect religion; in which the imagination is too apt to take place of the judgement, thereby preventing the party from drawing those sober and rational conclusions, which are alone consistent with the plain evidence of facts and confirmed experience.

It is no uncommon thing with persons of a particular cast and disposition, to fancy themselves to be more spiritual than they really are: and by the prevalence of this notion, (the creature, for the most part, of an heated and ungoverned imagination) they are led to persuade themselves, and consequently to endeavour to persuade others, that they can ascertain the pre-

cise time and manner, in which the Holy Spirit has carried on his work in them. But in so doing they are attempting to know more than is to be known; to account for a proceeding, which our Saviour plainly tells us is not to be accounted for. “The wind bloweth (says he) where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, nor whither it goeth.—So is every one that is born of the Spirit.”

When persons who affect to know so much, relative to the particular operation of the Spirit, can give a satisfactory account of the cause by which one of the most common effects in nature is produced, it will be time enough to attend to what they may have to say on the manner, in which the still more unaccountable work of grace is carried on in the human soul. Let them first tell us what causes the wind to blow; whence it cometh or whither it goeth; and we may then attend, at least with greater probability of satisfaction, to their account relative to the supernatural birth of the regenerate man.

The fact is admitted, because it has been revealed, that every regenerate person is born of the Spirit; but the manner in which this spiritual birth is effected, has not been revealed. An attempt to describe it, therefore, constitutes no part of rational religion, but is the essence of

enthusiasm, and the parent of deception. "The secret things belong unto the Lord our God, whilst those only which are revealed on this subject, belong unto us and unto our children, that we may do all the words of God's Law:" not that we should rest satisfied with the bare persuasion relative to the divine operation on the human soul; but that we should scrupulously determine the reality of such operation by the effects that accompany it.

We have nothing to do at present with the deceptions to which this mysterious operation of the Holy Spirit on the human soul has ministered, and still continues to minister; but from the letter of revelation, to maintain the fact; nor is it our object to account for that fact, but only to prove, in conformity with the text, that our ignorance of the process of divine grace in the work of regeneration, furnishes no better argument against the credibility of it, than does the unaccountableness of the manner in which a common operation in nature is carried on against its reality. In that creed of our Church which has (though without just reason) given offence to some Christians, chiefly, perhaps, because it attempts to explain more circumstantially, what is briefly contained in our other public confessions; the mysterious union of two natures in the person of Jesus Christ is compared to a

similar connection in the constitution of man. "For, (says the Creed) as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and man is one Christ." This, it may be said, is giving no information, because it is only explaining one unaccountable thing by another. True, but information on such subjects is not what is to be expected. The object of our church on this occasion, in condescension to the finite nature of the human understanding, is only to furnish such *an illustration* of a mysterious subject, as may dispose her members the more readily to believe it. That we have a reasonable Spirit within us, by which we are connected with a superior class of spiritual Beings, and that we have a bodily frame, susceptible of pain and sensual gratification, by which we are related to the animals beneath us, we are as certain as that we exist, although the manner of this union of our spiritual and corporal part in the same substance is totally unaccountable. For that knowledge, imperfect as it is, which is to be attained on this subject, we must be indebted to our observation of effects. And this appears to be the only knowledge in spiritual things, of which the human mind is capable; at least we may say, it is *that only* degree of knowledge, which an all-wise Deity has thought proper to communicate to man, in his present condition. And that man

who makes no better use of his reasoning faculty, than to conclude, that because he does not know every thing, therefore he will believe nothing; justifying his disbelief of spiritual things, by the insufficiency of his understanding to comprehend them; may with equal reason arraign the wisdom of his Creator, for not having made him an angel, instead of making him what he is.

This arrogant sufficiency of the human intellect, as it is sometimes applied to the things of God, is thus checked in the sublime language of Zophar to Job. “Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty to perfection? It is as high as heaven, what canst thou do; deeper than hell, what canst thou know?” “Hearken unto this, (says Elihu to Job in another part of this most beautiful poem,) stand still, and consider the wondrous works of God. Dost thou know when God disposed them, and caused the light of his cloud to shine? Dost thou know the balancings of the clouds, the wondrous works of him which is perfect in knowledge? How thy garments are warm, when he quieteth the earth by the south wind? Hast thou with Him spread out the sky, which is strong, and as a molten looking glass? Teach us what we shall say unto him: for we cannot order our speech by reason of darkness. Touching the Almighty, we cannot find him out; he is excel-

lent in power and in judgement, and in plenty of justice : and respecteth not any that are *wise of heart.*"

We know not, my brethren, the works of creation, with which we are daily conversant. We are familiarized with effects, at the same time that we are ignorant of causes. We see, we wonder, we admire ; but in our attempts to explain, we are obliged to content ourselves at best, with very partial information. What then is to be expected from poor short-sighted man, when he presumes to bring within the compass of his narrow understanding those subjects, which were never intended to be submitted to his particular investigation ; but that, in the language of Elihu to Job, " he should multiply words without knowledge."

Our conclusion on this subject may be short. The general inference to be drawn from the words of the text is, that man's finite understanding is not the standard by which the works of an infinite Being can be measured. If in the works of nature, as they are called, which are daily submitted to the test of our senses, the deficiency of such a standard must necessarily be acknowledged ; with what a degree of conscious and awful diffidence should it be applied to those mysterious subjects, which constitute the secrets of the divine councils, and into which the angels

themselves are represented as desirous to look. Sufficient on these subjects has been revealed, not indeed to gratify man's curiosity, but to establish the Christian's faith: not to qualify him to give an answer to Nicodemus's question, "How can these things be;" but to satisfy him, from the best authority, that such things *really are*. The chief substance of the christian faith consists in a firm belief of the joint operation of the three persons in the Godhead in the œconomy of human salvation: the Father creating, the Son redeeming, and the Holy Ghost sanctifying the creature man: God the Father graciously accepting the ransom for his redemption; God the Son freely offering it; and God the Holy Ghost perfecting the mysterious plan, by preparing and qualifying fallen man for the salvation that has been provided for him. This consideration should teach us to set a proper value on that nature, the redemption of which from the consequence of sin, was not thought beneath the attention of the three persons in the divine essence, thus acting in concert for the recovery of their lost creature. A consideration which ought to raise our thoughts above this world to high and heavenly things; by reminding us that this body which was sold under sin by our first parent, is, through the redemption in Christ, and the operation of his Spirit, still capable of be-

coming a temple for the Holy Ghost to dwell in. In what particular way the Holy Ghost takes possession of this temple, it has not been thought necessary that man should be particularly informed: it is folly in him therefore to attempt to ascertain it. But though we are not able perfectly to unfold the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit on the human soul, yet of this we are certain, because Revelation has informed us, that they are not of that *irresistible* nature, to be inconsistent with the condition of man, as a free, reasonable, and accountable being. For the Holy Spirit moves, inclines, and disposes, but does not impel*: He leads and conducts all who are willing to be led and conducted by him; but does not overrule continued opposition and wilful resistance. “My Spirit (said God to the old world) shall not always strive with man.” Such is the uniform language of Scripture; such

* “Βελομεναις μὲν γὰρ ὁ Θεὸς ταῖς ψυχαῖς συνεπιπνεῖ. εἰ δὲ ἀποσταίεν τῆς προθυμίας, καὶ τὸ δοσθὲν ἐκ Θεοῦ Πνεῦμα συνεσάλη. τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἀκούσας σωζειν, ἐστὶ βιαζομενὸν· τὸ δὲ αἰρωμενὸς χαριζομενὸν.”
—Clemens, p. 57. For God inspires *willing* souls: but if they go off from their willingness, the spirit of God, which was given to them, will contract itself. For to save them who are *unwilling* to be saved, is the part of an agent that useth *force*; but to save those who choose salvation, is (*χαριζομενὸς*) the part of one who freely and kindly grants his help.

was the correspondent doctrine of the primitive Church; and such is the doctrine of the Church of England. Knowing this, we know enough to direct us in the management of our spiritual concerns. Knowing that the Holy Spirit is ready to take up his abode with us, provided we shut not the door of our hearts against Him, it is our parts to attend to his motions, to obey his suggestions, and not to resist that work which he is graciously carrying on within us, for the purpose of enabling us to work out our salvation. Whilst we pray therefore to God with the Psalmist, that he would create in us a clean heart and a right Spirit, we must at the same time remember what God elsewhere said to his people; “Cast away from you all your transgressions, make you a new heart, and a new spirit.” If we pray unto God in faith, he will not fail to perform his part in the Gospel covenant, for “he is faithful who hath promised:” it remains for us to take heed that there be no deficiency on ours. To this end, my brethren, let a faithful and diligent use be made of the appointed means of grace.

“Prayer, the word, and the sacraments (as Bishop Andrews long since observed) be every one of them an artery, to convey the Spirit into us. Well may it be hoped then, that by the use of all three, we shall be in a good way to-

wards the attainment of our desires. For many times we fail, when we use *this*, or *that one alone*: when it may be, God hath appointed to give his Spirit by neither, but by the *third*. It is not for us to limit or appoint Him, how, or by what way, He shall come unto us; but to offer up our obedience, in using all the appointed means. And in using *them all in faith*, the Spirit will not fail to come unto us; either as a wind, to allay in us the unnatural heat of some distempered desire to evil; or as a fire to kindle in us some *lukewarm*, or some *key cold affection* to good. He will come unto us, either as *the Spirit of truth*, enlightening us with some new knowledge; or as *the Spirit of holiness*, reviving in us some virtue or grace: or as the COMFORTER, ministering to us some inward contentment, or “*joy in the Holy Ghost*.” For a compleat obedience on our part in the use of all his prescribed means, never did go away empty from *Him* without a blessing, nor ever shall.”

Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto Him be glory in the Church by Jesus Christ, throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.

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DISCOURSE II.

1 JOHN IV. 1.

Beloved, believe not every Spirit; but try the Spirits whether they are of God; because many false Prophets are gone out into the world.

IN a former Discourse with which the present claims connection, my object was to prove, in conformity with the allusion addressed by our blessed Saviour to Nicodemus, that our ignorance of the particular process of the Holy Spirit in the work of regeneration, furnishes no better argument against the credibility of the fact, than does the unaccountableness of the manner, in which a common operation of nature is carried on against its reality. “The wind, for instance, bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, nor whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit.”

For our knowledge, in either case, we are indebted principally to our observation of effects; whilst we remain in an equal degree unable to ascertain the precise mode of operation employed by each productive cause. Our ignorance of the secret things of nature, indeed, leads into a field for laudable enquiry and practical experiment, generally entertaining, oftentimes useful; which by extending the bounds of the human intellect, may be considered as contributory to the improvement of man's present condition. But the same cannot be said of our ignorance relative to the mysterious work of the Spirit; every attempt to *particularize* and describe which, seldom failing to minister to gross and dangerous deception. And, when it is considered, that this pretended acquaintance with the particular manner, in which the secret operation of the Spirit is carried on in the soul, has proved the fruitful source, from which false religion has at different times derived its greatest support; it becomes a matter of essential importance, that a more certain and less imaginary standard should be resorted to, for the purpose of enabling Christians to form a correct judgement, both of themselves and others, relative to their spiritual condition.

The Apostle, in the text, points out the necessity of a certain mode of trial, as preparatory to the determination of our judgement on this

nice subject. “ Beloved,” says he, “ believe not every Spirit, but try the Spirits whether they are of God ;” and for the following reason, which fully justifies the Apostle’s caution ; “ because many *false* Prophets are gone out into the world.” There were false prophets or teachers then, in the days of the Apostles ; a circumstance which rendered it necessary, that sound members of the Church should not too hastily admit the pretensions of every Spirit. These pretensions were to be tried, for the purpose of ascertaining a most essential point, whether they were of God : whether they proceeded from “ the Spirit of Truth, or the Spirit of Error.”

The Apostle, on this occasion, is writing in immediate reference to the times in which he then lived. “ Little children, (says he in a former part of this same Epistle) it is the last time ; and as ye have heard that Antichrist shall come, even now are there many Antichrists ; whereby we know that it is the last time. *They went out from us*, but they were not of us : for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us ; but *they went out* ; that they might be made manifest, that they were not all of us.” The Apostle is here alluding to those false pretenders to the Spirit, as Simon Magus, Hymeneus, Philetus, Diotrephes, and others, who appeared in the early days of the

Church, deceivers and being deceived; who by the vain boast of extraordinary communications from on high, and through a “love of pre-eminence,” drew crowds of credulous, weak judging Disciples after them, in opposition to the ministry of those truly spiritual men, who, in conformity with their divine commission, were at that time teaching the way of God in truth. With these * false prophets, the Church, in the days of St. John, abounded: some of whom, it should seem, regarded neither Spirit, nor doctrine: whilst others of them were so giddy-headed, that in a manner every Spirit contented them, which caused the Apostle to use in effect these words. To the one sort, he said, “Believe not every Spirit.” And to the other, “although you are not to believe every Spirit, still it is your duty to believe *some Spirit*.” These false prophets the Apostle distinguishes by the title of Antichrists, or adversaries of Christ; persons, who, under the influence of the Evil One, were engaged in counteracting the plan set on foot by

* Out of the ashes of these false prophets there sprang up so many Schismatics and Heretics, that according to the testimony of some of the early writers of the Church, the very name of Christ was rendered odious; inasmuch, that, as Socrates has reported, Christians and Christianity became subjects for mockery and ridicule on the public stages.

Christ, for the salvation of mankind; by corrupting his doctrine, and of course opposing that discipline which had been wisely established for its preservation. They are described as separatists from the communion of the Church; “they went out from us,” says the Apostle, “giving themselves out to be some great ones, they loved to have the pre-eminence;” and therefore did not submit themselves to those in the Church, who had been appointed to rule over them. So long then as the Church shall remain in any country, and there shall be separatists from it, of the description above given, the direction in the text continues necessary to be observed. As false prophets are still going out into the world, the Spirits must still be tried, in order to ascertain their pretensions and character.

St. Paul, writing to his disciples at Ephesus, with the view of guarding them against being “tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive;” or (as it might be more literally translated) “by the cheating of men, through their craftiness, for the management of error* ;” di-

* The words here used in the original, are particularly expressive, and applicable to the subject the Apostle had

reads them to “put on the whole armour of God, that they might be able to stand against the wiles of the devil:” or, as the word might be translated, against the “*methodisms* of the devil.” (“Τας μεθοδειας τῆ Διαβολῆς.”)

Many and various are the wiles or *methodisms* which this arch deceiver of mankind is permitted to exercise, for the trial of God’s faithful servants. But in none is the fineness of his mischievous policy more discernible, than when he assumes the form of an angel of light, in the practice of those pious frauds which are best calculated to impose on weak, credulous, well-meaning perhaps, though certainly not well-judging Christians.

In conformity with the foregoing language of the Apostle, considered as descriptive of the craftiness practised for the purpose of cheating the early members of the Church out of the

before him.—“Τῇ κνβειᾷ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐν πανουργίᾳ πρὸς τὴν μεθοδειαν τῆς πλάνης.” The word κνβειᾷ here translated *cheating*, comes from κνβεύω, to play at dice, so to cheat and deceive; and signifies that cheating or dexterity, with which gamesters craftily move the dice to and fro. The word πανουργία, translated *craftiness*, always used in a *bad* sense, signifies particularly that quality of the mind, by which its possessor is prepared *to do any thing, or for any work*.—Whilst πλάνη, here rendered by the general word *Error*, signifies particularly, *a wandering out of the right way*.

See James v. 20.

principles of sound Christianity, the false Apostles alluded to in the text, are called in different parts of Scripture*, Spirits of Error, seducers, deceivers, authors of divers sects, false speakers, and the children of the devil, who is the father of all falsehood. And with respect to their manner of conducting themselves, with a view to the success of their deception, they are described as humble and lowly in outward appearance, though possessed at the same time of a contentious and unquiet disposition; as doting about questions and strife of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, and evil surmisings: as speaking proud things and swelling words of vanity; as persons standing high in their own conceit; and in consequence, despisers of government, and evil speakers of them that are in dignity and authority. Such were the prominent features of character, by which the false prophets in question, were notoriously distinguished. To trace a resemblance between them, and any false prophets of the present day, is an undertaking, it must be acknowledged, that demands the exercise of judgement, discretion, and charity. But as man is the same fallen creature now, that he was in the days of the Apostles;

* 1 Tim. iv. 1. 2 John vii. Col. ii. 8. 2 Tim. iii. 13.
2 Tim. ii. 14. 1 Tim. iv. 1. 1 Tim. vi. 4. 2 Pet. ii.
Jude.

and as separation from the Church is the same thing now it then was, it is to be expected that the same correspondence between cause and effect, should still continue to subsist. Thus much, at least, may be said, that the History of the Infant Church was left upon record for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come; the design of its being written, must consequently be in a great measure frustrated, should the Church of the present day fail to draw from it that profitable lesson, which the consideration of the present subject is calculated to furnish.

A warm zeal for religion, admitting, as we are certainly disposed to do, the honest intention of the party, is not always accompanied with sufficiency of knowledge, or soundness of discretion. And when this is not the case, it is very easy for a man to form a false estimate of himself and others; by measuring spiritual things by an erroneous standard. Self-love, the great ruling principle of the human breast, naturally disposes to self-estimation. And men, in holding the scale of judgement for themselves, seldom hold it with that even and steady hand, necessary to ascertain the exact proportion of their individual weight. That self-estimation which accompanies the consideration, that we are under the particular direction of the Holy Spirit, and

as such, favoured with extraordinary illuminations, tends to confirm the persuasion, that such is actually the case with us. And from the moment that this persuasion takes possession of the mind, every warm fallacy of the imagination, every more than ordinary emotion of the human breast, are immediately taken for the certain marks of some divine impulse; for undoubted communications from the Spirit of God. The wild extravagancies to which, through the enthusiastic reveries of methodism, this persuasion has occasionally led, need not be particularized. They have disgraced the History of the Church, more or less, in every stage of its existence; and will continue to disgrace it, so long as there shall be an evil Spirit permitted to deceive, and man in a condition to be deceived.

Was this deception, indeed, of an innocent nature, and unattended with important consequences, time spent in an endeavour to counteract it, might be regarded as thrown away. But, when it is considered, that this pretended acquaintance with the *immediate* influences and operations of the Holy Spirit, has been the cloak, under which, much of the false Religion that has appeared in the world has been concealed; it becomes a matter of importance to the Christian Church on earth, that the members of it, in forming a judgement of spiritual things,

should be directed by a less fallible standard. The Apostle in the text, guards us against believing every Spirit; in other words, against giving heed to every teacher pretending to the inspiration of the Spirit; but directs us to *try the Spirits*; that is, to try all such pretenders, for the purpose of ascertaining the reality of their character: for, as it follows, “many false prophets are gone out into the world.”

These false prophets then constituted that order of Spirits here pointed out, as necessary to be examined. Prophets in some respects resembling those described by Jeremiah. “I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran; I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied.”—Jer. xxiii. 21. “What is the chaff to the wheat, saith the Lord?” Did Christians at all times possess the judgement to make the necessary discrimination in this case, they would not be so often subject to imposition in a matter of this important concern. In the first age of the Church there were Christian teachers, who, by their boasted pretensions to superior piety and immediate revelation, attempted to bring St. Paul’s ministry into contempt: whom St. Paul thus describes. “Such,” says he, “are false Apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the Apostles of Christ, and no marvel; for Satan himself is sometimes transformed into

an Angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also be transformed as the ministers of righteousness : whose end shall be according to their works."

Such were the ministers which Christians of that day, in conformity with the direction of the text, were called upon to try; for the purpose of ascertaining, how far their pretensions and manner of conducting themselves in the office they assumed, corresponded with the proper qualifications of the ministerial character. "Beloved, believe not every Spirit, but try the Spirits, whether they are of God." A direction at all times necessary, whilst the Church continues in her militant state, for the security of her members against deception; whether there are any false Apostles among us, exactly answering to the description above, given by St. Paul, or not. We therefore proceed to enquire, in what way this apostolic direction may be best reduced to practice.

To enable us to ascertain the weight or quality of any given commodity, recourse must be had to a standard, independant of the thing to be tried. The Spirits here alluded to, must be tried upon a similar plan. A certain established standard must be appealed to; according to their conformity to which, the genuineness of their character is to be determined. A decision has been too generally admitted in this case, accord-

ing to which, spiritual men "*measuring themselves by themselves*," have been often permitted to bear witness in their own behalf; a mode of judgement equally inadmissible, either on the ground of Scripture or reason. "We dare not," says St. Paul, "make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: for they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise." Language which, from the strictness of its application to their case, one might be almost tempted to suppose, was intended to describe the conduct of some boasting professors of the present day. But true wisdom certainly is not to be obtained by a mode of trial, which furnishes no security against deception. "If I bear witness of myself," says Christ, "my witness is not true;" that is, in such case, you might reasonably except against it. "The works that the Father hath given me to finish, the same works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me." This constituted the ground of the argument addressed by our Saviour to the unbelieving Jews, as calculated to furnish irresistible conviction relative to the divinity of his character. "If I do not the works of my Father," said Christ to them, "believe me not. But if I do, though ye believe not me, believe the works, that ye may know

and believe that the Father is in me and I in him." And it was this kind of testimony that led Nicodemus to the following wise conclusion. "Rabbi," said he to Christ, "we know that thou art a teacher come from God; for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him." *John* iii. 2.

A premature decision of judgement generally precludes future enquiry. And this is equally the case; whether the judgement formed is in favour of the cause to be judged, or against it. The Jews had in their own minds determined that Jesus was not the Messiah: and having thus determined, they were indisposed to enquire into the evidence competent to have convinced them of their error. The Christian world is full of such Jewish scholars, who begin where they should end: who in consequence of having first determined, are never afterwards disposed to examine. Such is the case with all those Christians, who having first established it in their minds, that such persons or teachers are spiritual men; deem it unnecessary to enquire into the works they perform; on the principle, which, if built on a *sure* foundation, must remain unshaken; that spiritual men cannot but do spiritual things.

But on the authority of our Saviour, and in conformity with the standard to which he appealed for the establishment of his divine mission,

the real spiritual character of any man is not to be ascertained by the judgement formed of him in the mind of others; (the value of which remains itself to be duly appreciated, previous to any sound conclusion being drawn from it;) nor by the profession or testimony of the party himself; (for this also is liable to reasonable objection;) but by the quality of the works he performs: in other words, by the general and uniform tenor of his life and conversation. And if our Saviour, in his own case, admitted the testimony he might bear to his own character to be in itself *insufficient* for the conviction of others; it surely is not to be expected that greater credit should be given to any other person.

But exclusive of this consideration, which ought to stop the mouth of every reasonable and modest man on this subject; the standard proposed as necessary to determine the judgement of fallible man in this case, is open to no possible objection; for it is in itself plain and simple, taking nothing for granted, but determining every thing by notorious facts. “Ye shall know them,” says our Saviour, “by *their fruits*. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit, but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.” Our Saviour, it is to be observed, is here speak-

ing of *false* prophets. And such is the standard by which, in his judgement, the truth or falsehood of the prophetic character is to be ascertained: even as the good or bad nature of a tree is determined by the quality of the fruit it bears.

All persons then, who take on themselves the character of prophets, or boast any spiritual communications, must expect to be tried by this standard; as the one that has been set up in Scripture for the purpose; and the only one which can lead to an infallible decision on their respective pretensions. "For it is not," continues our Saviour, "every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord;" it is not every one that calls himself the chosen of the Lord, and talks of his spiritual communications; as heretics, schismatics, and the greatest hypocrites have been frequently known to do; it is not every one that professes his belief in Christ, looks to him for salvation; or even boasts a particular interest in him, "that shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven:" which is in other words to say, that "he who doeth righteousness is righteous."

Such is the Gospel standard, by which the true spiritual character of every professor is to be definitively ascertained. All other marks may be, and too often are, the delusions of the imagi-

nation, the ebullitions of spiritual pride, and the specious coverings of self-deception. But whoever suffers his judgement on these subjects to be governed by the sober dictates of reason, and the infallible standard of Scripture, which prescribes in this case the old fashioned rule of keeping the commandments, and walking worthy of the Christian calling, as the only mark by which spiritual men are to be known, will never be deceived. By their fruits he will know them: and though he will be unable to say *when*, or in *what manner* the Holy Spirit communicates his supernatural influence to the party, he will still be seldom at a loss to determine, from the nature of the effects produced, whether they really are the works of the Spirit or not.

We do not mean to say that all pretensions to the direct and sensible influence of the Holy Spirit are equally vain: there have been, and doubtless may still be cases, in which God may think fit for special reasons, on certain occasions, to speak more intelligibly than in others; for the purpose of impressing a more immediate conviction on the mind of the favoured party. But such must be considered particular cases; and from particular cases no general rule of judgement can be formed. Still however, unless the conviction produced be accompanied with some outward manifestation of divine power, or spi-

ritual effect, it can furnish no unequivocal proof to others, with respect to the actual condition of the party concerned. He may deceive himself, and must consequently deceive others. He may have mistaken the delusion of Satan, for the inspiration of the Holy Spirit of God. Admitting him to have what he calls, by the misconstruction of a text in Scripture, "*the witness in himself*;" still it may be a *false* witness: and even supposing it to be a *true* one, it can prove nothing to others, but only so far as it is accompanied with those effects, which manifest the work of the Spirit. St. Paul considered himself to be acting under the immediate impulse of an holy zeal, when he persecuted the Church of Christ; but when his eyes were opened to see the power against whom he was acting, and the delusion of that Spirit by which he was directed, he confessed himself to be the greatest of sinners. A circumstance, that proves right and wrong not to be matters of *mere human opinion*; since one man may believe his own lie, as firmly as another believes the truth; and may persecute the Church, or tear it in pieces by Heresy and Schism, with the same confident conviction on his mind, that he is doing God service, that the martyr possesses, when laying down his life to support it. A consideration that ought to lead to this conclusion, that in determining

on the spiritual character of any man, recourse should be had to a standard of judgement calculated to furnish that *unequivocal* test, by which the truth or falsehood of such character is to be authoritatively ascertained. To such a test no truly spiritual men, who suffer themselves to be governed by the dictates of sound reason, can possibly object; because it answers the double purpose of discovering error, and establishing truth; of exposing the vain pretensions of the hypocrite, whilst it confirms the character of the real Christian. And truly spiritual men would do well to consider, of what great disadvantage it is to the cause of religion, to place themselves, in some degree, on a level with false prophets; by appealing, in common with them, to that sort of *equivocal* evidence, which is in itself incapable of ascertaining the real character of either party.

It is to be lamented indeed, that a certain unintelligible language has crept into religion, which has received too much countenance from many persons, who, though they may mean well, ought still to know better things. I call it *unintelligible*, because it is subject to no certain established rule of interpretation; but where understood at all, must be understood only according to the private fancy or opinion of the party who adopts it. But private fancy or opinion

can constitute no proper ground, on which to build a sound and rational conclusion on any subjects ; more particularly on those of a spiritual kind, in which the work of the imagination is so often apt to supersede the sober dictates of a well-informed understanding. At the same time we do not deny that comfortable experience, which pious and sober Christians feel, in consequence of the effect produced on the powers and dispositions of their minds, by the doctrines of Christianity rightly appreciated. The consideration of the over-ruling providence of an all-wise and gracious God ; the reliance on his promises ; the contemplation of his stupendous mercy in Christ ; the acknowledgement of his abundant grace in the mission of his Holy Spirit ; the consequent expectation and ardent desire of eternal happiness ; such sentiments and dispositions, produced by the knowledge of religion, are matters of *experience*. But what degree of conviction soever this experience in religion is capable of furnishing, can be furnished only to the party concerned in it ; and even to him, it is rather a proof of the sincerity of his belief, or the firmness of his persuasion, than of the reality of the thing believed, or of the rectitude of his own conduct.

Thus much indeed is admitted, that as a man is equally certain of the effect of the wind blow-

ing, as he would be, was he capable of ascertaining the cause from which such effect proceeds; so he who truly repents, believes, and obeys the Gospel, and who, on examination, finds himself possessing those graces and dispositions, which are called in Scripture “the fruits of the Spirit;” and which he is assured by the Scripture can proceed *from no other source*; may as confidently ascribe such religious attainments to divine operation, as if he could actually ascertain the precise manner, in which such operation was carried on. But in such case, his conclusion is not drawn so much from his own internal experience, as from the manifestation of certain characteristic effects: the goodness of the tree according to the unequivocal mode of proof pointed out in Scripture, is determined in such case, not by any imaginary description of its supposed properties, but by the quality of the fruit produced. Whilst on the other hand, he who expects to be given credit merely for what he says about his *private feeling* and *experience*, must be considered as bearing witness to himself; in which case we have the authority of our Saviour for concluding, that his witness is *nothing*.

In fact, truly spiritual men, and pretenders to the Spirit, in forming an estimate of their respective condition, adopt a very different process of judgement. The false pretender argues *forward*

from the cause to the effect; and supposing his premises indisputable, proceeds in confidence to his conclusion. Considering himself, from the testimony of his *private feeling and experience*, to be the chosen of God, and as such under the peculiar guidance of the Spirit; he concludes himself to be possessed of what constitutes the reality of the character he assumes. Thus his actions, whatever they may be, derive a sanction from the principle, of which he supposes himself in possession. A deception which has led, and is at all times capable of leading to the most fatal extravagancies.

Whereas the *truly spiritual* man proceeds on much surer ground; by arguing *backwards from the effect to its cause*. Considering that all holy desires, all just works, and all christian graces, proceed from the Holy Spirit; so far as, upon impartial examination, he can trace these characteristic marks of a regenerate mind in his own character; so far he concludes himself to be living under the influence and direction of the Holy Spirit of God. Thus whilst the false pretender proves his practice by his profession; first presuming that he has the Spirit, and thence concluding that his ways are spiritual; the truly spiritual man, proves his profession by his practice; by first bringing himself to the standard of the Gospel, and from the conviction that his

life corresponds with it, thence concluding himself to be in the number of God's faithful people. And should he be asked to give a reason for his faith, he may adopt, in a qualified sense, the language addressed by our Saviour to the Jews : " *If I do not the works, believe me not. But if I do, though ye believe not me, believe the works.*" For thus Nicodemus reasoned with our Saviour on a similar point ; " No man can do the works that thou doest, except God be with him."

What remains to be said on this subject, must be deferred to some future occasion. In the mean time, may God so bless what has been delivered to the direction of your judgement, that ye may not be in the number of imaginary Christians, who deceive themselves ; but, considering that the Being with whom you have to deal seeth not as man seeth, may be found among those *truly spiritual* children of Abraham, who shall inherit the promises.

DISCOURSE III.

1 JOHN IV. 1.

Beloved, believe not every Spirit ; but try the Spirits, whether they are of God : because many false Prophets are gone out into the world.

MY object in discoursing upon these words, is to guard, as far as may be, the well meaning Christian against those deceptions, to which the cause of religion has at all times been more or less subjected from vain pretenders to spiritual attainments. With this view, on a former occasion, it was laid down, as a principle from the authority of our Saviour, that no man's witness of himself was to be received ; but that the genuineness of his character and pretensions was to be determined by an appeal to some certain established standard.

The standard proposed for the purpose was a plain and simple one, which takes nothing for

granted, but determines every thing by notorious facts; even that infallible standard of Scripture, which prescribes the old fashioned rule of keeping the commandments, and walking worthy the Christian calling, as the only sure mark by which spiritual men are to be known.

To such a test, it was presumed, no truly spiritual men, who suffer themselves to be governed by the dictates of sound reason, could possibly object; because it answers the double purpose of discovering error and establishing truth; of exposing the vain pretensions of the hypocrite, whilst it confirms the character of the real Christian. It remains only by way of conclusion to our subject, that we consider in what manner this infallible standard may be so applied, as best to reduce the direction in the text to practice. “Beloved, believe not every Spirit, but try the Spirits, whether they are of God: because many false Prophets are gone out into the world.”

To this end, it is to be observed, that there are marks both of a *negative* and *affirmative* kind, by which the characters of men are distinguished; which, if properly attended to, cannot fail to lead to some satisfactory conclusion on this subject. The Spirits, the Apostle tells us, must be tried. And it is by duly weighing these characteristic marks in the scale of the Gospel, that such trial is to be made.

The first mark of the *negative* kind, wherever it is to be found, which demonstrates the possessor of it not to be under the influence of the true Spirit, is that of boasting and ostentation: because this is in direct contradiction to that Spirit of humility, which is one of the chief graces of the Gospel. “Put on (says the Apostle) as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long suffering.”—“For I say through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith.” And it is to the humble, we are told, that “God giveth grace,” *Jam. iv. 6.*

St. Paul has illustrated this doctrine of humility and lowly mindedness, which he so frequently pressed upon others, by the most striking example in himself. If any person had reasonable ground for boasting, St. Paul certainly had. Exclusive of what he might have said for himself as an Hebrew of the Hebrews, that touching the righteousness in the law he was blameless; and consequently, on that account, “if any other man thought that he had whereof he might trust in the flesh, he had more;” the Apostle was moreover favoured with those *particular* privileges under the Gospel, in which he might have

justly gloried, had it been expedient for him so to do. He was a chosen vessel to the Lord; he had been converted by a miraculous interposition; and had been favoured with such abundance of Revelations, that the danger was that he should be exalted above measure. Although however he stood, if we may so say, on this high ground for boasting, and was occasionally obliged to assert his pretensions against the presumption of those false Apostles, who were attempting to bring his ministry into disrepute; and on that account felt himself called upon to maintain, that “in nothing he was behind the chiefest of the Apostles;” he still concludes, with immediate reference to himself, that “*he was nothing.*” Whilst his description of his Christian progress is given in the following diffident and unassuming language. “But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss, for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dross that I may win Christ; and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness which is of the law of Moses, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith. That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of

his sufferings, being made conformable to his death ; if by *any means* I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. Not as although I had already attained or were already perfected ; but I pursue, if that I might apprehend or grasp the prize, for which I am apprehended of Christ Jesus." We have here no vain boasting ; no confident assurance of salvation ; but an interesting description of the spiritual progress of a modest, diffident Apostle ; anxiously pressing forward toward the mark of the prize of his high calling, but still only in that state of *comparative* attainment, which rendered it necessary that he should keep a constant watch over his conduct, " lest when he had preached to others, he himself should be a castaway." Whose advice to his disciples in correspondence with the diffidence which so strikingly marked his own character was this. " Let him who thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall." 1 Cor. x. 12.

With an eye, it is probable, to the unassuming conduct of St. Paul, as characteristic of the true Christian, is the following well-timed direction of one of our Bishops to his clergy. " Above all, I dehort you from encouraging your flocks to trust to *experiences*, to *sensible* impressions, to *immediate* illuminations ; they lead to error ; they inspire presumptuous confidence ; they engender assurances ; which, I tremble to

think that any sinful man, feeble and imperfect as he is, unprofitable after his best services, can dare to entertain *."

As the man then who boasts himself of his wisdom, does thereby manifest his real want of it; so the man who boasts of the grace of the Spirit, does in that very instance betray his want of grace. All religion therefore that is noisy, ostentatious, pharisaical, can bear no affinity to the sober, the humble, the unassuming religion of Jesus Christ.

A second mark of the *negative* kind, which demonstrates the possessor of it, not to be under the influence of the true Spirit; is disobedience to rule and order, and contempt of lawful authority; which distinguishes those, who on the presumption of their being possessed of superior illumination, think they are doing God service, in drawing away people from the regular and established ministry of the Church, to follow teachers who have no authority but their own to produce for their pretensions. Such irregular practice cometh not from the Spirit of God. For "God is not the author of confusion, but of peace: as in all the churches of the saints." And it is the direction of an Apostle, that the members of the Church should "obey them that have the

* Bishop of Rochester's Charge, 1803.

rule over them, and submit themselves, for they watch for souls, as they that must give an account." But how shall the Rulers in the Church watch for souls, who refuse to be watched over; by withdrawing themselves from their communion? Such irregularity is certainly inconsistent with the plan laid down in scripture for the government of the Church; it cannot therefore proceed from that Spirit, by whom the scripture has been revealed. It is indeed a glorious and most desirable privilege to be divinely illuminated; it is not to be wondered at therefore if self-estimation, that deluding principle which inclines to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think; should lead many almost imperceptibly into a confident persuasion, that they are in the number of those favourites of heaven, who are thus distinguished. This persuasion is moreover attended with this convenient advantage, that it supersedes the labour ordinarily requisite to qualify the minister of Christ rightly to divide the word of truth, and to become what he ought to be, a skilful guide of souls; by furnishing a compendious method of arriving at knowledge, such as it is, without study, and at the appearance of deep wisdom, without the exercise of thought, or the application of necessary means. But humble and modest men, who have a reverence for the Spirit,

and a knowledge of themselves, dare not thus presume; considering that the setting up a private Spirit, an imaginary illumination as a rule of judgement and conduct, to supersede those ordinary and regular means by which the affairs of Christ's kingdom in this world were designed to be carried on, is one of the master pieces of Satan's policy; permitted probably by God for the trial of his faithful servants; that they may be proved and exercised every way; and may learn to be as much on their guard against any surprize of the understanding, as against any seduction of the will.

The third and last mark of the *negative* kind, which indicates its possessor not to be under the direction of the true Spirit, is the insisting on those deceitful and equivocal proofs of the Spirit of God, to support which there is no authority from scripture to be produced. When men talk of *sudden* impulses, *violent emotions*, and *sensible* experiences as demonstrations of immediate inspiration; we are justified in concluding that some strange and unhappy delusion prevails in their case; because we know both from scripture and the history of the Church, that the work of the Spirit has been generally carried on in a very different manner.

“ As it is the most favourable interpretation of such pretensions to suppose, that they are the

result of *enthusiasm*, it would be in vain to oppose them by any thing in the shape of argument. But it will not be without use to remind those, who may be called upon to acknowledge the claim to such inspiration in their teachers, that Christ and his Apostles did not rest the proof of their inspiration on their *own assertion*, but on their power of *working miracles*: and that as no one in these days has the power of working miracles, no one is justified in saying, that he speaks by the *immediate* inspiration or direction of God. Christ indeed has promised, that he will be present with his Church always, *even unto the end of the world*. This however does not mean that he will so assist those, to whom he may commit the ministry of the Gospel, as to render the exertion of their natural faculties, and the means of improving them unnecessary; much less, that he will so assist them, as to supersede his own dispensations: but that he will give such a blessing to their sincere endeavours in promoting the knowledge and influence of his religion, as shall not fail to make them eventually successful*.” Such unanswerable reasoning must, it is presumed, have its full weight in the scale of every sober Christian.

* Pearson's most excellent Sermon “on the Sin of Schism.”

We have indeed instances recorded in scripture of demoniacal possessions, accompanied with extravagant appearances and violent emotions; but the testimony which the parties under these unhappy circumstances were at times permitted to bear to the ministry of the Gospel, was uniformly rejected both by Christ and his Apostles; as if with the design to guard Christians in after ages against such dangerous delusions. Still we find no instances, in the regular administration of the affairs of Christ's kingdom, of such extraordinary personal emotions being had recourse to by the Apostles, for the promotion of the cause they had in hand. Miraculous convictions in consequence of some immediate impressions made on the party, did certainly take place under the ministry of our Saviour and his Apostles, and were of a piece with that miraculous evidence which was judged necessary to accompany the early propagation of the Gospel. But, though we presume not to limit the divine proceedings in the œconomy of grace, and therefore think it too much to say, that no *extraordinary* means are *now* made use of for the *instantaneous* conviction of favoured individuals; still, as miraculous evidence is no longer thought necessary for the support of the Christian cause, neither Reason nor Scripture seem to warrant the expectation, that such miraculous convictions should be continued.

The directions given by St. Paul to his disciple Timothy, contain not a single hint, that could lead him to expect any such *extraordinary* interposition in the discharge of his ministry. He was to “study to shew himself approved, a workman that needed not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” He was to “meditate on the things he had learned, to give himself wholly to them, that his profiting might appear to all.” He was “to take heed unto himself and to his doctrine, that he might both save himself and them that heard him.” On the ground, that “all Scripture was given by inspiration of God, and was profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.” From whence it appears, according to the substance of the Apostle’s charge to Timothy, that the conversion of the sinner was not considered to be the effect of any *instantaneous sensible* impression made on the party, but a work regularly carried forward, under the administration of the proper means of Christian edification, and the invigorating influence of the Holy Spirit; till by a gradual and insensible progress from grace to grace, and from attainment to attainment, it at length terminated in the perfection of the Christian character. “So,” says

our Blessed Saviour, “is the kingdom of God; as if a man should cast seed into the ground; and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, *he knoweth not how.*” *Mark* iv. 26.

The analogy made use of on this occasion teaches us to expect no *extemporaneous* productions either of nature or of grace; but such only as are to come forward in their regular and wisely appointed course. “The earth,” says our Saviour, “bringeth forth first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear*.” —“The seed on the good ground,” says he, “are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, *keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience*†.”

To these marks of the *negative* kind, so called, because they prove the party to be unpossessed of the true Spirit, it will be sufficient to oppose that single mark of the *affirmative* kind pointed out in Scripture; by which our judgement may be infallibly directed on this subject. “If ye love me,” says Christ, “keep my commandments.” Such is the test by which that love is to be proved. “For if a man love me,” said Christ on another occasion, “*he will keep my words; he that loveth not, keepeth not my sayings.*”

* *Mark* iv. 28.

† *Luke* viii. 15.

“ If we say, that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie ; but if we walk in light, the blood of Christ cleanseth us from all sin.” And “ whosoever (saith the Apostle) is born of God doeth not sin,” that is, doth not allow himself in any habitual course of sinful practice.

This then is that true mark of a spiritual life, which brings all enquiry on this subject into a very narrow compass. When our conscience assures us, that, making allowance for human infirmity, we so think and so act, as the Spirit of God directs in Scripture ; *then, and then only*, are we confident, that we are *born of the Spirit*, and are *led by the Spirit*. This is that infallible criterion, to which we may safely trust for the determination of our judgement, both with respect to ourselves and others. For this criterion is of universal application, as well as of standard authority. “ As many as are *led by the Spirit of God*,” saith St. Paul, “ they are the sons of God.” For “ in Christ Jesus nominal distinctions signify nothing ; neither circumcision availeth any thing nor uncircumcision, but a *new creature*.” But to ascertain *when* and *where* this new creature really exists, it is not necessary that we should be able to determine the precise hour, day, or week, when this new creation actually took place ; by what particular

process it has been carried on, or by what *sensible* impulses or experiences this spiritual renovation has been accompanied; because the Apostle has pointed out a criterion, by which the point at issue may be more readily ascertained; where he says, that circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping the commandments of God: which in fact, *is every thing*; that is, it is the end, in which all faith and profession must terminate, to render them of any *real* estimation.

The keeping the commandments of God then constituted, what the Apostle elsewhere describes under the title of the new creature of the Gospel. And the keeping the commandments, is that spiritual fruit, by which, according to our Saviour's rule of judgement, the quality of each tree planted in God's vineyard, the Church, is to be ascertained. "By their fruits ye shall know them." In strict conformity with which infallible criterion, is the direction of the Apostle. "Let no man (says he) *deceive* you; he that doeth righteousness is righteous." As if he had said; many are the deceptions which prevail in spiritual matters. To guard therefore against false judgement on this head, let it be a rule with you to take nothing for granted: but in all cases of this nature, to determine the character by the actions of the

party. For in *this* the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil; who-soever doeth not righteousness is not of God."

Admitting then that we know nothing of the manner in which either the *good* or *evil* Spirit carries on his respective operation on the human soul; still from the effects produced, we may certainly know, which is the ruling power in any given case: and from this knowledge alone is a safe judgement to be formed. Such is the conclusion we are authorised to draw both from the doctrine and practice of our blessed Saviour; who never would have made good and evil actions, the infallible standard, by which to form a judgement of the spiritual character of the agent, if they had not constituted the most proper one for the purpose.

The foregoing considerations, if taken together and duly weighed, are calculated to produce this double effect. They will check that freedom of speculation in spiritual matters, which tends to bring the mysteries of Religion into contempt; at the same time that they will restrain those uncertain conclusions, drawn, not from the evidence of facts, so much as from the imagination of the party; which tend for the most part to frustrate the end to which true Religion was designed to minister. With such considerations before him, the christian will neither

presume to *doubt*, because he cannot perfectly comprehend every subject that God has thought fit to reveal; nor will he attempt to *particularize* those subjects, on which it was not intended that he should be particularly informed. Adopting the wisdom of the son of Sirach, he will “not seek out the things that are too hard for him, neither search the things that are above his strength. But *what is commanded*, he will think thereupon with reverence: considering, that it is not needful for him to see with his eyes things that are in secret. For many are deceived by their own vain opinion, and an evil suspicion hath overthrown their judgement.” Ecclus. iii.

21.

The allusion made use of by our Saviour to convey to Nicodemus some notion of the operation of the Holy Spirit on the human soul, which constituted the subject of a former discourse, must not therefore be strained beyond its intended bearing. The wind we know to be, on occasions, irresistible in its operations, bearing down all before it. The changes produced by it on the face of *passive* nature, are at times sudden and extraordinary; and cannot fail to make an impression on the mind of the spectator, relative to the immediate cause of their production. But in the work of the Spirit, man is not merely a *passive* subject; nor is that mysterious work

carried on in that violent and overbearing way, as to enable the party concerned, at any time precisely to mark its progress.

When God manifested himself to Elijah, he was neither in the strong wind, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire; but in the small still voice. Correspondent with this still voice, are the general operations of the Spirit on the human soul. They are gentle and imperceptible; like the soft breathing of the summer's gale, which keeps the air in motion, without driving it into tempestuous exertions: or the wholesome dew of Heaven, which insensibly refreshes the drooping field, without leaving behind it any marks, by which the particular process of its invigorating operation is to be distinctly traced. Thus do the influences of the Spirit mix themselves up insensibly with our thoughts; but make use of no violent efforts to disturb or direct their course: so that whilst our lives and actions bear testimony to the effect, we are at the same time at a loss to ascertain the precise mode of operation, by which it has been produced.

But though we cannot in this case gain a degree of knowledge to gratify curiosity, we may still obtain sufficient for the direction of our conduct. Provided the great object for which we live, the salvation of our souls, be secured; we may safely leave the more compleat mani-

festation of divine wisdom in the work of grace to that day, “when we shall know, even as also we are known.” It is sufficient for our present information to know (such being that kind of knowledge most proper for a state of trial,) that whilst the Holy Spirit worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure, he yet at the same time worketh *with us*; because we are commanded to “work out our own salvation,” and to “make our calling and election sure.” So that whilst the Holy Spirit is free in his operation, acting when and in what manner he pleaseth; still we know that his operation is accommodated to the condition of the party, as a reasonable and accountable Being; because Scripture has informed us that it is to be resisted.

From whence it follows, that those *violent* and *sensible* impressions, which some are apt to consider as particularly characteristic of divine influence, by which a man is supposed to be carried forcibly and irresistibly, from a state of nature to a state of grace, are not *now* to be expected. Sudden and extraordinary manifestations of divine power are not suited to that state of Christianity, when the channels of communication between earth and heaven, through the ministry of the word and sacraments, have been regularly established. No immediate voice from

heaven, as in the case of St. Paul, is now expected, for the conversion of the hardened sinner: for this would be to look for the continuance of immediate supernatural interposition, when the object, for the accomplishment of which, it was originally exercised, appears to have been completed. The work of regeneration is now carried on, not so sensibly perhaps, though doubtless as effectually by the ordinary means of grace, as it ever has been by the more extraordinary operations of the Spirit. God speaks to the members of his Church *publicly* by the mouths of his ministers, in the language of argument, persuasion and example; and *privately* by the convictions of an awakened conscience. Let the ears of the Christian be but properly open, and though he may be unable to trace the progress of the divine work on his soul, he still will not fail to bear testimony to its effects.

This consideration, whilst it will prevent him from wasting his time, and misemploying his thoughts, in seeking to be “wise above what is written;” will, at the same time, confine his attention to what ought to be his proper employment. Knowing that the Holy Spirit worketh by means suited to his condition; and knowing moreover, what those means are; if he is wise, he will continue regularly in the use of them; in full confidence, that the work which

the Holy Spirit has begun in him, he will not fail to finish, provided no impediments are thrown in his way. Affured, that according to the established process of divine grace, “to him that hath it shall be given;” that is, to him who makes a proper advantage of the assistance vouchsafed, to him shall be granted more abundantly. At the same time, instead of drawing conclusions with respect to his spiritual state from some *supposed sensible* operations of divine grace, by which he may deceive both himself and the world; he will learn to try his own spirit, as well as the spirit of others, by that rational and infallible standard, set up in Scripture; which teaches him to determine the *actual condition* of every tree, by the quality of *its fruit*.

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